

News Release



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Po'ouli Death Leaves Species' Future Uncertain

An extremely rare Hawaiian forest bird that was hoped to be part of a last ditch effort to save the species has died. The po'ouli, a male that had been living at the Maui Bird Conservation Center in Olinda, Hawai'i since September, passed away close to midnight on Friday, November 26th.

The bird had been moved to the Conservation Center by the Maui Forest Bird Recovery Team with the hope of starting a captive breeding program with the last three individuals of this species. Unfortunately the two other birds, believed to be in the wild, have not been observed for several months.

The po'ouli is a small black and gray songbird that was discovered just 31 years ago. The bird that had been brought to the Center was believed to be of advanced age (with a known age of at least 8 years) and missing one eye. The bird was originally thought to be a female, but definitive DNA testing revealed the bird was a male. Animal care staff recently determined that the bird had contracted avian malaria (a mosquito borne disease not native to the Hawaiian Islands). The cause of death for this po'ouli has not yet been determined. Initial necropsy results (performed by pathologists at the San Diego Zoo) are inconclusive with regard to cause of death.

"We are always sad to lose an animal in our care," said Alan Lieberman, avian conservation coordinator for the Zoological Society. "In this case, we may not have lost just a bird, but one of the last remaining vestige of a species. It is difficult to realize that our last efforts to save this species rely on just two birds."

In light of this bird's death, biologists will review their plans for the remaining two birds that may still exist in the wild, which are believed to be a male and a female. A field team from the Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project will return to Hanawi Natural Area Reserve on November 30 in another attempt to locate the birds.

"Although we have not seen or heard them for many months, it may be that they have shifted their home ranges," said Eric VanderWerf, Hawaiian bird recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "All of the birds are old for forest birds, but birds have been resighted after long absences in the past, and we are not willing to give up all hope yet."



The stocky little bird with a black mask is part of the Hawaiian honeycreeper family, but is so unique it occupies its own genus. It is the only Hawaiian forest bird to rely heavily on native tree snails as its food. The elusive po'ouli was not even discovered until 1973, when a group of University of Hawai'i students conducting research on the east slope of Haleakala sighted a bird they had never seen before. It was named "po'ouli," which means black head in Hawaiian, by Mary Kawena Puku'i, a renowned authority on Hawaiian culture.

The Maui Bird Conservation Center – like the Keauhou Bird Conservation Center on the Big Island – is operated by the San Diego Zoo. These centers work in collaboration with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the State of Hawai'i and other entities to save endangered bird species on the Hawaiian Islands.

"Our goal of saving the po'ouli is now very difficult and may not be achievable, but we must continue to try to save the species we have left," said Gina Shultz, acting field supervisor for the Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific islands office. "In addition to the po'ouli, we have 31 other endangered bird species in Hawai'i that are threatened by loss of habitat, introduced predators, and diseases. Rather than giving up hope, we need to rededicate our efforts to save these unique birds that are such an important part of Hawai'i's native forests.

The Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project is made up of a team of ornithologists supported by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the State Department of Land and Natural Resources. Guidance for the team's work and implementation plans to save the po'ouli from extinction are carried out by the Po'ouli Working Group, a team of more than a dozen experts from several agencies and organizations.

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